



Reasons for Living: Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality

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Preface

Finding meaning in life and achieving some authentic sense of identity are key developmental tasks for adolescents as they progress towards adulthood. While many young people do not readily use the word spirituality, it refers to the way they mesh with the spiritual and moral dimensions to life. The constructs meaning, identity and spirituality have useful credentials for interpreting the psychological development of young people; they can be used for analysing and giving perspective to their thinking, emotions and behaviour as they negotiate the maze of contemporary culture and the psychological perils of adolescence.

The same constructs – meaning, identity and spirituality – are also useful for interpreting and evaluating culture; and they are relevant to educational theory and practice.

Spiritual and moral purposes have been important for school education – for as long as schools have sought to promote the personal development of the young. However, there still remains a fundamental, but natural ambiguity about how to implement spiritual and moral education appropriately. The reason: precisely because personal change processes in beliefs, attitudes, values and moral behaviour are more complex than, and at a different level from, educational change in knowledge, understanding and skills. Links between teaching and the acquisition of values are naturally more complicated and more tenuous than the links between teaching and the common outcomes for education; we can teach adolescents proficiency in mathematics – even quantum physics – but we cannot so easily teach them not to take drugs.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging the limitations of school education in bringing about spiritual and moral change in pupils, there remain important opportunities within classroom teaching and learning for progressing their spiritual and moral development. This book is about trying to make sure that the opportunities for doing this well are not neglected. The idea of exploring ‘reasons for living’ is a short hand for an education that tries to help young people become well informed about, and think through issues related to meaning, identity and spirituality; this, in turn, may help them chart their way through a life world that has become increasingly complex and daunting.

Discussion of expectations for spiritual and moral education in both public and religious schools has always been controversial. It is unlikely that this will change; as noted above, much of the difficulty lies with the natural complexity of links between education and personal change; hence, theory for education of the ‘whole’ person will always be complex, controversial and somewhat open ended. Nevertheless, persistence with the development of this theory is important for ongoing attempts to make the personal dimension to school education as valuable as it can be for young people.

Ongoing discussion of the spiritual and moral dimensions to education is in the national interest – it should be an educational priority. The Federal and State Governments’ initiatives in values education have been an important response to this need. But more remains to be done. In times when most interest in educational outcomes is dominated by concerns about measurable performance and employment oriented competencies, and even national economic productivity, it is important for all Australian school students that the spiritual and moral purposes to their education do not remain nominal, or as rhetoric, where there is little flow through from purposes to practice.

This book tries to address these issues in both theory and practice. It proposes that good use can be made of the constructs meaning, identity and spirituality for conceptualising and implementing a spiritual and moral education in schools – both public and independent. Teaching related to these constructs can contribute to students’ personal education in across-the-curriculum studies as well as in values education and in particular subjects like Citizenship, Personal Development, Religion Studies, Philosophy and Ethics. While we consider that the book makes an important contribution to values/moral education, it was beyond our scope to explore relationships with the extensive literature in this area.

Of various constructs that might be used in curriculum planning, the trio of meaning, identity and spirituality, all of which are interrelated, are particularly valuable because of their contemporary educational relevance and their significance in young people's personal development.

The argument in the book presumes that little real progress will be possible in any school program of personal education unless teachers first develop a basic understanding of the content related issues – hence the importance of the second part of the book in providing a 'primer' or introductory typology for educators on the constructs meaning, identity and spirituality, particularly as they relate to the psychological, spiritual and moral development of young people. While not attempting to provide a comprehensive survey of research on these constructs, this will provide a perspective on meaning, identity and spirituality that will be a good starting point for study by educators. Hopefully, it will also stimulate further research both sociological and educational. The intention is to enhance the background that educators bring to their teaching with the hope that this will flow into teaching and learning processes, as well as into their more informal interactions with students.

Complementing what is written in structural developmental psychology about youth personal development (E.g. Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, Kegan, Fowler and Oser), the focus here is more on the spiritual and moral development of young people through their negotiation of personal/cultural issues in meaning, identity and spirituality; hence, it is not a stage theory of development, but (as suggested above) an interpretation of the ways youth negotiate the 'cultural maze' and the 'psychological perils of adolescence'.

Too often discourse about spiritual and moral dimensions to school education in Australia remains context specific – there is not much exchange on these matters between educators in the public and independent sectors; or, the discussion is skewed towards the question of state financial aid for religious schools. In this book, we propose implications for three contexts – across-the-curriculum studies in public schools, religious education in independent (especially religious) schools, and state based religion studies courses – within the one volume, precisely to promote a wider educational discussion that could benefit all of the country's schools. This broad scope has resulted in a volume of handbook like proportions; but this was considered necessary to be able to say something substantial about the situation and issues in each of the three contexts, while prompting educators to become more aware of what is happening in contexts different from their own. For example: Religious schools can often put too much store on formal religious education and religious ethos for communicating beliefs, spirituality and values – in other words overrating or 'over-expecting' the school's religious influence. While in public schools, their role in teaching values can never really be denied, although just what the word 'teaching' means when applied to values can be open to conflicting interpretations; and when debate stalls on this question, it inhibits practice that may be of benefit for the personal development of pupils. Each of parts 3-5 begins with a chapter that gives historical perspective; this arrangement may facilitate dialogue by giving the reader some bearings on the pertinent issues in each context that are taken up subsequently.

While the book was written specifically for teachers, it should be useful in university education programs; hopefully too, it will engage education researchers. In addition, the second section discusses issues that are of wider community and professional concern. This material may be helpful for all who are interested in the psychological, spiritual and moral development of youth (E.g. For parents, and for professionals engaged in the care of youth in areas like health services, youth services, and church ministry.)

While dealing with the Australian situation, the book has relevance for education internationally. It creates possibilities for interesting comparisons with education in other countries.

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